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ABSTRACT

H.P. Grice's theory of conversation can be used effectively to teach revision in composition courses because it teaches students the rules for effective writing. Grice has formulated a general principle, the Cooperative Principle, based on the assumption that talk-exchanges among speakers are "cooperative efforts" having "a common purpose or set of purposes." In observing the cooperative principle, four conversational maxims are also observed: (1) quantity--making as informative a contribution as required but not more so; (2) quality--saying only what is true and not including things for which there is insufficient evidence; (3) relation--being relevant; and (4) manner--avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, unnecessary prolixity, and disorder. The value of the Gricean model is that it asks new questions concerning revision and makes the standard questions clearer, more comprehensible, and more forceful by providing the students with an organizational scheme that does not sacrifice its heuristic power of simplicity. (EL)

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The Gricean Model: A Revising Rubric

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CS 209 417

The Gricean Model: A Revising Rubric

Because most writing is intended to be read by others, writers are committed to expressing their ideas in clear form, to making their ideas complete and coherent--that is, to finding the best possible way to convey what they have to say to their readers. In teaching undergraduate composition, we try not only to apprise our students of these committments on the part of the writer but also to demonstrate how, in the process of writing, the writer struggles to fulfill them. Writing and revising, as Knoblauch and Brannon point out, are not separate stages in the writing process; rather, they are combined to make meaning (89-90). This recursive model of composition, which more accurately describes what writers do when they write, has rendered the linear model obsolete in that revising is no longer thought of as a final stage in the writing process. Still, to many students, revising means merely correcting a misspelled word, choosing a better word, or adding a mark of punctuation.

In her analysis of the revision strategies of student writers, Nancy Sommers found that when students revise, they devote most of their time to lexical changes, what she calls "a thesaurus philosophy of writing," and they largely ignore textual problems (381). Faigley and Witte later corroborated Sommers' conclusions in their own text analysis of revision strategies. The consensus, then, is that students tend to make surface changes and ignore content or meaning changes. Their conception of revision parallels what we normally think of as editing. If we are to teach our students how to revise, we need to

communicate to them what writers do when they revise.

H. P. Grice's theory of conversation, consisting of the Cooperative Principle and the Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner, can be effectively used as a revising strategy in composition courses because it teaches students the rules for effective writing. Grice's theory is part of speech-act theory, first sketched by J. L. Austin in his William James Lectures at Harvard in 1955 (subsequently published under the title How To Do Things With Words) and further developed by John R. Searle in Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language in 1969. Grice, however, modifies the system worked out by Austin and Searle and offers a more general approach to an an understanding of language use. His four maxims, in the context of the Cooperative Principle, can furnish students with a better understanding of the meaning of revision and thus enable them to do more complete evaluations of their writing.

Grice formulates a general principle, called the Cooperative Principle, that speakers in a talk-exchange observe, and he bases it on the assumption that our talk-exchanges are "cooperative efforts" having "a common purpose or set of purposes" (45). The Cooperative Principle (hereafter referred to as the CP) prescribes that what we say in conversation generally coincides with the direction established in the talk-exchange. He defines the CP as follows:

> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk-exchange in which you are engaged. (45)

In observing the CP, we also observe the four conversational maxims, which Grice outlines as follows:

I. Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

II. Quality

Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

III. Relation

1. Be relevant.

IV. Manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

Our verbal exchanges, according to Grice, are coherent and purposeful, not "a succession of disconnected remarks" (45). Participants in a talk-exchange cooperate by agreeing on the purpose or goal of the exchange (the CP) and by their mutual understanding of the rules of conversation (the Maxims) that govern what is appropriate or inappropriate to the talk-exchange. It is possible for participants to fail <u>unintentionally</u> to fulfill a maxim. Speakers, for example, may become so involved in the exchange that they may say things they don't believe (i.e.

violate the maxim of Quality) or misjudge what the hearer already knows and give too much or too little information (i.e. violate the maxim of Quantity). Although these breaches place the CP in jeopardy, they rarely result in a breakdown of the CP because of the turn-taking feature of speech. The hearer, in other words, is entitled to interrupt the speaker if the speaker should violate a maxim, to ask clarifying questions, and to reallign the purpose of the exchange, if necessary. The hearer may ask the speaker to define a key term, for example. But when participants intentionally fail to fulfill a maxim, they violate the maxim on the level of what is said, but they observe it on the level of what is being implicated. This is what Grice calls "exploiting" or "flouting" a maxim. If the hearer assumes that the speaker is observing the CP and maxims, the hearer will draw inferences on the basis of what the speaker has said in order to maintain the assumption that the CP is in force. Grice uses this example to show how the maxim of Quantity may be flouted in a writing situation:

> A is asked to write a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc." (53)

A cannot be unwilling to cooperate because if A were, A would not be writing in the first place. A knows that more information than this is expected, and A is capable of furnishing this information because X is his student. It follows then that A is implicating what he is reluctant to express in words--that Mr. X is not a good candidate for the philosophy job.

Being a language philosopher, Grice is principally concerned with the strategies operating in conversation, but he stipulates that the CP and Maxims govern not merely talk-exchanges but any cooperative, "indeed rational behaviour" (47). How, then, might the CP and Maxims help students better understand what writers do when they revise?

One of the advantages of Grice´s theory is that it helps students to understand that writing, like speaking, is a cooperative effort. The CP operates between writer and reader just as it does between speaker and hearer. It defines for the student the relationship between writer and reader, and it enables the student, when faced with a writing task, to conceptualize an audience. Writing is cooperative in that writers desire for their intended readers to understand the message being sent. Likewise, the readers participate by decoding the written text for its meaning, or its intention. This sort of transaction between writer and reader, for instance, is central to Richard Larson´s thesis in "The Rhetoric of the Written Voice." Examining the rhetoric of style in nonfiction prose, Larson adopts as his beginning premise the idea that written discourse "participates in a transaction with its readers" (115). He maintains that the reader participates in the process of discovering the writer, for "the reader may form judgements of the worth of what is said, of its credibility or importance, and of his or her willingness to continue participating in a transaction with that writer" (116). Robert de Beaugrande defines a text as a "communicative occurrence"

because the reader must be able to detect or infer the writer's goals on the basis of what is said, and because the writer must be able to anticipate the reader's responses by building "an internal model of the receivers and their beliefs and knowledge" (132). Though writers and readers are detached and unable to communicate via a talk-exchange, they are nevertheless engaged in a cooperative transaction.

This cooperative transaction places demands on both the writer and the reader, but perhaps more so on the writer. If the CP is to operate between writer and reader, the writer must insure that his or her utterance is clear and coherent so that the reader understands. Using jargon inappropriately, for example, or engaging in circumlocution is an evasion of responsibility on the part of the writer, resulting in failed communication--a breakdown of the CP. The CP requires that the writer not only conceptualize an audience but also formulate a thesis concept to give focus and purpose to the writing--to provide a center of gravity. Unlike the speech situation, the writer must attend to the maxims and avoid <u>unintentional</u> violations because the reader is not present to question these violations. Furthermore, writers must anticipate and address questions their readers are likely to have. Honoring the CP then necessitates that writers "plan and prepare [their] utterance" in advance, as Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out (116). It is the writer's responsibility in the planning and preparation of the text to adhere to the maxims. On the receiving end, the readers likewise assume that the discourse is planned and prepared, and they approach the text willing to share a goal with the writer.

It should not be surprising that written communication, to quote Pratt again, is "longer and more difficult to decipher than spontaneous, spoken discourse..." (117). The care with which an utterance is expressed by the writer is to insure that the channel of communication is open and that the CP is in force.

An understanding of the CP, then, focuses the students' attention on the particular needs of the reader. A recurring problem in undergraduate composition courses is the failure of students to conceive of an audience when they write. The result is writing that is often vague and nebulous--faceless writing. If students are unable to see writing as cooperative, based on a clear sense of purpose and committment, then the concept of audience evaporates. The CP acts as a reminder to students that, if their writing is to be effective, they must be aware of their audience and of their responsibilities to that audience. Furthermore, if students are to apply the maxims in the revising process, it is essential that they abide by the CP and formulate a clear goal or direction.

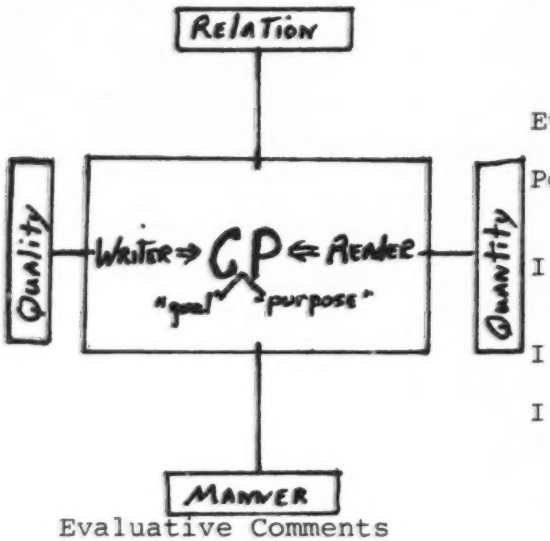
Once the CP is clear in the minds of students, we can introduce them to the four maxims to demonstrate how their fulfillment may result in successful writing and, conversely, how their nonfulfillment threatens the CP, provided the maxims are not being exploited or flouted. I will come back to this notion of exploiting maxims, but first let us look at Grice's maxims in conjunction with the CP.

In the model below, I have reordered the maxims and have added evaluative comments to help students locate weaknesses in

their papers. Other more specific comments may be added. I would make it a point to discuss these evaluative comments with my students and to suggest directives for revision. The maxims are stated in plain terms and are easily committed to memory. Together they constitute a good rubric for revision.

Evaluative Comments

People won't see why this is important.
People won't be very interested in this part.
I'm getting away from the main point.
I'm being too obvious.
This example isn't relevant to my audience.



Evaluative Comments

People won't believe this.
I'm overgeneralizing here.
I'm not being true to my experience.
I should identify the authority I'm citing.
I need to evaluate my facts and weigh my sources.

Evaluative Comments

People will need more information, more explanation.
I should use more examples, illustrations.
I'm saying more than I need to here.
I need to define this

Evaluative Comments

People won't understand what I mean here.
This is a wordy, ineffective sentence.
I think this could be expressed more clearly.
I need to organize this information better.
I should check my punctuation in this sentence.
I need to show the relationship between these ideas.

The maxim of Relation is placed at the top of the square because I see this as being of primary importance. It leads students to examine the relevance of their ideas, examples, details, etc., to their established goal and also to their audience. It leads them to examine the details within a paragraph, or within paragraphs, and to test the relevance of these details to the topic idea. The maxim of Quality calls the students' attention to false generalizations and to the accuracy of their statements. It leads them to examine the truth of their facts, personal experiences, and other ideas. It is particularly helpful when students are using research material because it focuses their attention on the value of their sources and the facts therein. The maxim of Quantity refers to the amount of information necessary to accomplish the writer's goals. It invites questions such as How much information do my readers require? Am I providing enough examples to convince my readers of the validity of my idea? Or am I giving too much information? In answering these questions, students either develop their ideas more fully or eliminate extraneous material. The maxim of Manner, placed at the bottom of the square, comes last because it emphasizes not <u>what</u> is said but <u>how</u> it is said. It treats elements of grammar and style, with emphasis on word economy, sentence clarity and precision, and orderliness. When students revise, they generally attend to this maxim but with varying degrees of success. Taken together, these maxims or rules may enable students to move beyond surface changes to an examination of content in their papers, leading to more substantive changes.

The value of the Gricean model is not that it asks new questions relating to revision; its value is that it makes the standard questions clearer, more comphehensible, and more forceful by providing the student with an organizational scheme that does not sacrifice its heuristic power for simplicity.

Consider, for example, what the CP and maxims reveal about the following student draft, in which the writer attempts to contrast home-life and dormitory-life.

Student Draft

There is a big difference between life at home and life in a dormitory. Both dormitory and home life have their advantages and disadvantages. They both provide the necessities for life.

The biggest difference between life at home and life in the dormitory is the space in which you have to live. At home there are different rooms which serve different purposes. The dormitory has one room in which you have to put the living room, the bedroom, the kitchen and the study in. When living at home you have a sense of ownership and privacy, where as living in the dormitory you share your tangibles with your roommate and you share all the facilities with the other residents of the floor. At home meals are family oriented unlike the meals in the dormitory, which are very impersonal. Furthermore, you have a choice of what you want to eat at home and as often as you wish. In the dormitory your meals are on a schedule and you have no choice of food.

One advantage of living in the dormitory is that you have freedom to do what you want to. For example you can come home when you want. You can have anybody come see you at any time. At home you have less freedom to do what you want because there are usually certain rules in which you are supposed to follow. Another advantage of living in the dormitory is that you're able to be yourself instead of putting up a "front" for your parents so they will stay off your back.

Some people will adjust better to dormitory life than others. Some people like the independence of dormitory life, where others feel the lack of security without a family atmosphere.

The writing assignment asked the student to write an informative essay on some aspect of college life, addressed to an audience of incoming freshmen. In this sample draft, it is clear that the

student has failed to address the specific audience. He makes no attempt to relate his experience to the particular concerns of incoming freshmen--their questions, their fears, their inexperience, their stereotypes--and the consequence is a rather dull paper. If students are aware of the CP, they understand the necessity of knowing who their readers are--of defining their audience. Another matter of concern in this draft is its lack of purpose. If the CP is in force, the writer must clearly establish his goal or purpose. The opening sentence announces the subject of the paper, a contrast between two environments, but the subject is then complicated by the second sentence, which states that both environments have their advantages and disadvantages. Nowhere does the writer express the purpose behind the contrast. What specifically does he intend to show by contrasting home-life and dormitory-life? By not showing a preference for either one, is he taking the path of least resistance? A glance at the introductory paragraph reveals that the writer does not really know what he wants to say; as a result, the reader cannot determine the writer's purpose in the exchange. By not establishing a clear goal, the writer confounds the reader and consequently threatens the CP: the writer is not fully cooperating.

If the writer is attempting to enumerate the advantages and disadvantages of home-life and dormitory-life, he observes the maxim of relation insofar as the information he provides is pertinent. But the points of contrast are rather obvious ones. If the writer analyzes the subject in more depth and writes with his audience--incoming freshmen--in mind, he will no doubt

produce other less obvious contrasts and give a greater degree of relevance to the paper. He does well to observe the maxim of quantity, but he overlooks ideas in both body paragraphs that require more detail. For example: How are meals in the dormitory "impersonal"? What "tangibles" must one be expected to share in a dormitory? He violates the maxim of quality by making false generalizations. In paragraph 2, for example, he states there is "no choice of food" in the dormitory, and in paragraph 3, he implies that rules are nonexistant in dormitory life. Such generalizations, if not caught in revision, can discredit the writer and, in effect, put a strain on the CP. Finally, the writer must improve his manner of presentation--how he expresses his ideas. He needs to eliminate choppy sentences, for example, and wordiness; to experiment with more varied sentence patterns and improve paragraph coherence. Most students do their best to observe this maxim, editing for errors in grammar and mechanics. But what many students do not realize is that their attention to the other maxims is equally important. By putting into practice the four maxims, students learn in effect how to satisfy their readers' expectations.

I have said that when writers violate a maxim, they put the CP in jeopardy. There is one exception to this, and it involves the notion of exploiting or flouting a maxim. Exploiting occurs in writing when writers intentionally violate a maxim and when the violation serves the communicative intent of the writer. A writer, for example, may effectively use irony or hyperbole and thus exploit the maxim of quality: "Make your contribution one that is true." The point here is that the rules can be broken.

However, before our students can knowingly and effectively break the rules, they must first know the rules. Mary Louise Pratt in Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse writes about the protected CP in literary texts: every instance of rule violation, she says, is counted as flouting and is resolved by implicature (160). Regrettably, this is not the case in undergraduate composition courses. We cannot make the same assumption about the CP in the papers written by our students. We must assume, rather, that violations of the rules result in large part from our students' not knowing the rules. What I have attempted to do in this paper is furnish insight into how we might teach them the rules, which they can then apply to their writing in the context of the CP. By learning and applying the Gricean model, students can develop a better understanding of what revision is all about.

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